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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 008994

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINS TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: CONTROVERSIAL MEHMET AGAR REPLACES TANSU CILLER AT HELM OF CENTER-RIGHT DYP

REF: ANKARA 2431

Classified by Political Counselor John Kunstadter. Reason:
1.5 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Mehmet Agar, elected in November as an independent M.P. and a notorious figure in the Susurluk "State-Mafia" scandal of the mid-1990s, is the new leader of center-right DYP, elected to replace former P.M. Tansu Ciller at Dec. 14 DYP Convention in Ankara. Agar will likely steer DYP along a more nationalistic course. While running counter to prevailing popular interest in a more open and modern society, such a course may help the party draw support from disaffected youth and other elements that went for the upstart Genc Party in November. End summary.

Agar In...

¶2. (C) Poloffs Dec. 14 attended the center-right True Path Party's (DYP) extraordinary congress, held to elect a leader to replace Tansu Ciller after the party's bitter defeat in the Nov. 3 national elections. (After DYP just missed passing the 10 percent national vote barrier, Ciller declared her intention to step aside). Mehmet Agar, who in the mid-1990s served as then P.M. Ciller's Interior Minister, won a landslide victory, tallying 815 of some 1109 valid delegate votes. Ilhan Kesici, though Ciller's favorite and a former DYPer who returned to the party after the elections, finished a distant second with 227 votes. One senior DYP official and close Embassy contact claimed Ciller was busy parleying with Kesici up to the last minute in a failed effort to keep Agar from the top spot. She failed; with the handwriting on the wall, she delivered a tearful farewell speech to the assembled host.

...The Dragon Lady Out

¶3. (C) Although Ciller had announced that she would not stand for party chairman again, she apparently had tried to engineer a comeback at the convention. Before the convention, some DYP contacts noted that, given the "extraordinary" nature of the proceedings the party did not have time to draw up a new slate of delegates and instead relied on a cadre long cultivated and controlled by Ciller. In the event, DYP's defeat at the polls Nov. 3 had burst the Ciller balloon, sending even loyal associates scrambling for safe haven. Party Vice Chairman M. Selim Ensarioglu, until virtually the last minute a key Ciller backer, told D/Polcouns Dec. 12 that Agar was likely to win -- and that an Agar victory would mean the end of Ciller. Ensarioglu, a Kurd, said he opposed the more aggressive, police-oriented nationalism espoused by Agar, but was leaning toward him for practical political reasons. In the event, Ensarioglu held on to his Vice Chairmanship. Ciller advisor Omer Barutcu told poloff Dec. 13 that if Agar won, Ciller would have "no chance" to return to the Party helm in the future, though he added that she is too ambitious to simply go quietly.

Agar Hams It Up at "Funereal" Convention

¶4. (C) The convention was poorly organized and devoid of the usual enthusiasm and fanfare -- in the words of one DYPer, "more like a funeral" than a party assembly. Ankara's Ataturk Sports Hall, long a venue for such events, was stifling even by normal sweat-house Turkish standards; the intense cigarette smoke caused two elderly women to pass out and the Master of Ceremonies to plead twice for attendees to refrain from lighting up their cheap Turkish cigarettes. Signs at the gates admonished those present to leave their guns and other weapons at home, though many apparently

decided to ignore the advice. (Several senior DYP officials had expressed concern before and during the conference that given the high stakes involved, the event could turn violent). The usually simple task of choosing the party board turned into an hours-long and contentious process because proper ballot cards had not been printed. Despite their overwhelming numbers, Agar supporters could muster only a few half-hearted "Prime Minister Agar" cheers.

15. (C) In his acceptance speech, Agar declared his goal is to "unite the right" by first imposing unity and discipline on the (moribund) DYP. Apparently inspired by a line attributed to Cardinal Richelieu in Dumas' "The Three Musketeers," Agar defended the 1996 "Susurluk" scandal -- the shadowy nexus among senior officials of the military and Security Forces, "mainstream" politicians, and criminal gangs involved in fighting terror with terror and turning drug profits in the Kurdish southeast (reftel and previous) -- asserting that "whatever was done was done for the good of the State" and not for personal gain.

Bio: Agar Takes DYP Rightward

16. (C) Agar, a former Governor of Erzurum and Chief of the Turkish National Police, is best known for his role with Ciller at the epicenter of Susurluk. While Ciller tried to defend these actions and Susurluk perpetrators, she also eventually tried to dump her one-time confidant Agar, who as a DYP Member of Parliament was never tried for his alleged crimes. Agar was reelected 1999 and again in 2002 as an independent from his home province of Elazig in east-southeastern Turkey. Claiming to be of Turkish origin, Agar reportedly speaks the Zaza dialect of Kurdish that is widespread in the region; according to one former Elazig M.P., local Kurdish tribes have long supported Turkish ultranationalist figures against rival tribal and other organizations. Agar's strength lies in his reputation as a man of the people with strong interpersonal skills and a godfather-like presence. A graduate of Ankara University's prestigious Political Science Faculty, Agar is married with two children. Another child died of an illness in the late 1990s.

17. (C) Agar has some advantages. DYP's electoral defeat prompted it to clean house. The new party leadership roster is comprised of little-known and indeed some shadowy figures. According to several sources, Agar's political eminence grise is Ramazan Emre, an elderly man listed only as a member of the Central Administrative Board but whom we have seen making the rounds of Ankara tea-houses and back-room establishments with an entourage fit for a kingmaker. Also, despite its electoral defeat DYP tallied nearly 10 percent of the vote, which if handled correctly could provide it with a suitable base upon which to rebuild -- particularly given the near obliteration of DYP's rivals, the Nationalist Movement (MHP) and center-right Motherland (ANAP) parties. Ensarioglu averred to us that Agar's presence in DYP will help reform the hard right along more center-right lines. Others, including a former DYP M.P. now an AK (Justice and Development) Party member, worry that Agar will "MHP-ize" his party: transform DYP into a carbon copy of the ultranationalists.

18. (C) Agar's major liability is his association with Susurluk in the eyes of a public eager for an end to corruption in politics and the State, and a nationalism that runs counter to the prevailing interest in a more open, democratic society -- but which might win it enough additional votes from erstwhile Genc (Youth) Party supporters next time around. As Ensarioglu told us Dec. 12, "if there was a national election on the horizon, Kesici would have been the better man. But with the ruling AK holding a commanding majority and in no danger of early elections, Agar is the better man. At least, he's still in Parliament" as the only DYP M.P. Asked whether the new DYP leader would be a place-holder or the party leader into the next election cycle, Barutcu speculated that the new DYP boss will face a challenge if the party fails to do well in the next municipal elections. Our contacts note that those polls must be held no later than the spring of 2004, but could come early next year.

PEARSON